**1900: Reaching Upward and Outward**

At the start of the 20th century, New York City was well on the way to establishing itself as a sophisticated metropolis. With the annexation of Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island two years earlier, the city overnight had expanded from 22 square miles to 359 square miles and had more than doubled its population, from 1.5 million to 3.1 million. Still, more New Yorkers were arriving every day from Europe. Nearly half a million immigrants came through Ellis Island in 1900 alone, and that number would double by 1903. The origin of immigrants was changing, too, from primarily northern Europe to eastern Europe and Russia, as millions fled political oppression. Absorbing this influx was a strain on the housing supply. Because apartments were cheapest on the Lower East Side, newcomers flocked there, often doing without clean water or adequate sanitation, and enduring extreme crowding and epidemics of tuberculosis and typhoid. In the first years of the new century, density on the Lower East Side peaked at 260,000 residents per square mile. The New York State Tenement House Law, passed in 1901, was a step toward reform that would lead to building codes and housing inspections. In addition to absorbing European immigrants, New York City was becoming home to more black migrants from the South. Because of overbuilding by real estate speculators in northern Manhattan at the close of the 19th century, apartments there were available for these newcomers. Within a generation, Harlem would attain its title as the largest black city in the world. At the top end of the housing spectrum, New York’s scions of industry and commerce, such as the Astors, Rockefellers, and Goulds, were building mansions along Fifth Avenue, now known as Millionaire’s Row. They weren’t the only ones moving out of crowded Lower Manhattan.

**On the move:** With elevated trains running the length of the island, commercial and residential development of Midtown and the Upper West Side was more feasible, just as the Brooklyn Bridge beckoned the middle class eastward and the automobile would open up the suburbs. In 1900, ground was broken for the city’s first subway line, the IRT, which would run along the West Side and into Brooklyn. By now, the theater district had moved up to the 42nd Street neighborhood, as retailers and hoteliers also pushed northward. In a few years, serious interest in city planning and zoning would take hold, and the governing charter for the newly expanded city would be overhauled. In 1901, new mayor Seth Low, who had been mayor of Brooklyn and president of Columbia University, oversaw revision of the city charter, which set up the borough divisions and allocated powers among the mayor’s office, the Board of Estimate for financial affairs, and the Board of Aldermen for legislative matters.

**On the rise:** By this time, the Industrial Age was in high gear, and New York manufacturers dominated the clothing, printing, and metal-casting industries. As early as 1900, even though automobiles were hardly the dominant mode of transport, the city had six factories producing cars. It also had nearly 300 retail and manufacturing companies worth more than a million dollars that together accounted for 10 percent of the country’s total output. The human capital on which these statistics rest, chafing at working conditions, were forming collective bargaining organizations. One of the earliest, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, was founded in 1900. The financing for
New York’s commercial growth, as well as the nation’s burgeoning investment in public utilities, steel, oil, and railroads, meant plenty of business for Wall Street banking firms and for the New York Stock Exchange, which would erect a grand new building on Broad Street in 1903. Other grand buildings were on the rise, too, now that all the ingredients for skyscrapers—electricity, the elevator, steel-skeleton construction, and limitless ambition—were in place. Corporate headquarters clustered on Lower Broadway, where the first steel-skeleton building had gone up in 1989. By 1900, the Park Row building, at 32 stories, was the tallest in the city.

On the world stage: A city eager to take its place in the global arena was busy establishing grand edifices of culture. In the last decades of the 19th century, New York had built the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Opera House, Carnegie Hall, and the Museum of Natural History, and was about to build the New York Public Library. Another symbol of its success, the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France marking America’s 100 years of independence, had been dedicated in New York Harbor in 1886. In the brand-new century, New York’s port was booming. It was home base for most passenger steamships, and handled more than one-third of the nation’s exports and two-thirds of its imports, numbers that would drop in the decades to come with the advent of the airplane. For now, though, other technology had the city’s attention. It was busy burying the thousands of miles of unsightly telephone and electricity wires that criss-crossed its streets and trying to figure out how to keep the automobile, newly arrived on those streets, from frightening the horses.

Sources for text for 1900


Source for photos for 1900